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ABSTRACT

This study examines four-year college graduates who attended Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC) in North Carolina after obtaining their baccalaureate degrees, exemplifying a growing population of "reverse transfer" students. The study employed a telephone survey of the four-year graduates attending CPCC, an analysis of student records to describe the enrollment trends of this group over a ten-year period, and a review of research literature. Findings show that four-year graduates account for about ten percent of all community college credit students. In the research literature, the typical baccalaureate reverse transfer student is male, over 40, employed part-time, and white. However, in the CPCC study, the majority of reverse transfer students were female. Students attended community college for career reasons, although many enroll for personal self-enrichment, and most had four-year degrees in career, not liberal arts, areas. Most had considerable work experience, with many employed in professional and managerial roles prior to enrolling in community college. This trend of baccalaureate reverse transfer reflects the restructuring of the American economy. Individuals are increasingly being asked to abandon the concept of a single vertical career ladder and to recognize that viable careers can be horizontal and discontinuous. Contains 23 references. (AS)

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Community College Research Center

Occasional Paper

Four-Year Graduates Attending Community Colleges: A New Meaning for the Term "Second Chance"

John W. Quinley
Melissa P. Quinley

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Four-Year Graduates Attending Community Colleges: A New Meaning for the Term "Second Chance"

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ABSTRACT

The community college has often been described as a "second chance" institution for students who failed or stopped short in previous educational efforts. A newer type of "second chance" community college students are the growing number who are entering community college after having successfully completed a four-year degree. The purpose of this qualitative study of four-year graduates who attended Central Piedmont Community College (North Carolina) is to achieve a better understanding of this trend and lay the groundwork for further research. The study employs a telephone survey of the four-year graduates attending Piedmont Community College, an analysis of student records to describe the enrollment trend of this population over a ten-year period, and a review of the research literature.

The number of four-year graduates attending community college is growing and substantial-about ten percent of all community college credit students. In the research literature, the typical baccalaureate reverse transfer student is male, over 40, and white. They are employed full-time and attend community college part-time. In our study at Peidmont Community College, the majority of these students were female.

The majority of these students attend community college for career reasons, although many enroll for personal, self-enrichment reasons. Contrary to expectations, the majority of these students had four-year degrees in career, not liberal arts areas. Most of these students had considerable, not limited, work experience. Moreover, many were employed in professional and managerial roles prior to enrolling in community college. This trend reflects the restructuring of the American economy. Individuals are increasingly being forced to abandon the concept of a single vertical career ladder and to recognize that viable careers can be horizontal and discontinuous.

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INTRODUCTION

The community college has often been described as a "second-chance" institution for students who have failed in previous educational endeavors or who have stopped short of reaching a desired level of educational attainment. For example, low grades in high school may have prevented some high school graduates from attending their first-choice school. Other high school students, because of low grades or troublesome life circumstances, may not have graduated at all. Older students may be returning to education from low-skilled but working-wage jobs because they fear that the prospect for these jobs is bleak in today's economy.

Another type of second-chance students are traditional four-year undergraduates who have been required to attend community college until their cumulative grade point average is sufficient to allow their return. These students have been called "reverse transfers," because they reverse the traditional linear progression from two-year to four-year institutions. The phenomenon of the reverse transfer student has been discussed in higher education publications only to a limited extent over the last decade.

A quite different kind of community college students are those who enter the community college after having successfully completed a four-year degree or higher. These students have already demonstrated their academic ability. Many are looking for a second chance of a different sort:

- getting their first economically successful job
- starting a new or supplementary career (sometimes after a previous successful long-term position)
- exploring what they really want to do for a career
- developing serious, creative, self-enrichment interests

The research literature addresses this growing population to a limited extent, but much more needs to be understood. Prospective four-year college students and their parents, governmental policy developers, and administrators and faculty in higher education join the research community in having an interest in this population.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

It can be argued that the roots of the American community college lie most firmly in the soil of the transfer mission—students transferring from two-year

to four-year institutions. However, from its inception the community college mission has been comprehensive, including vocational/technical education, continuing education, and community service (Cohen & Brawer, 1989). Historically, the mission of community colleges has changed to accommodate the educational needs of the communities that they serve (Community College Roundtable, 1994).

A good example of this accommodation process is the phenomenon of the reverse transfer student. The early leaders in the community college movement probably never anticipated that community colleges would include reverse transfer students. Certainly the founders of the community college mission did not expect baccalaureate graduates to attend a community college as serious, long-term degree-seeking students. At this point, neither of these reverse transfer populations has reached the status of a new mission area, though this may well happen in the future as the economy continues to restructure, making postbaccalaureate enrollment in a community college a logical choice for many.

In the following sections, the research literature describing reverse transfer students with baccalaureate degrees will be highlighted. Their numbers will be noted, their reasons for attending will be analyzed, their demographic characteristics will be described, and their experiences at community colleges will be discussed.

Size of the Reverse Transfer Population

An early nationwide study (Heinze & Daniels, 1970) found that 9 percent of all community college students were reverse transfers. A decade later, Hudak (1983) reported a reverse transfer population of 16 percent—an increase of 7 percent in just over a decade. These two studies did not differentiate between reverse transfers with and without four-year degrees.

Since the 1980s, the number of reverse transfer students—both with and without a four-year degree—appears to have stabilized. Table 1 provides findings from studies that report the proportions of reverse transfers and baccalaureate reverse transfers. Across these studies, one-fifth to one-fourth of the community college credit population falls within the overall reverse transfer category, and about one-tenth of the credit population has baccalaureate degrees. However, due to difficulties in the way four-year graduates are identified by community colleges, it is most likely that these numbers are underreported in the research literature (Delaney, 1995).

Table 1
Proportion of Total Credit Enrollment Represented by Reverse Transfer and Baccalaureate Reverse Transfer Students Reported in Various Studies

Author	*Year*	*Reverse Transfers*	*Baccalaureate Reverse Transfers*
Slark	1982	21%	10%
Ross	1982	25%	13%
Mitchell	1984	20%	8%
Steenhoek	1984	25%	8%
Mitchell & Grafton	1985	20%	8%
Hogan	1986	23%	5%
Cohen & Brawer	1989	—	10%
Klepper	1991	—	5%–10%

Reasons for Attending a Community College

Traditional reverse transfer students—those without a four-year degree—have come to the community college because of such factors as academic failure, uncertainty about a major, or problems with adjustment while attending a four-year school (Hogan, 1986; Kintzer, 1973). Others have come as transient summer students (Reis, 1987).

In sharp contrast, baccalaureate reverse transfer students typically have had strong academic credentials and firm career aspirations. The majority of baccalaureate reverse transfer students attend a community college for career-related reasons, including improving skills, training to get a job, and discovering career interests (Delaney, 1995; Klepper, 1991; Lambert, 1993; Mattice, 1992; Renkiewicz, 1982; Slark, 1982; Steenhoek, 1984; Tombley, 1993). According to several studies, however, a majority of reverse transfer students attend a community college for personal, self-enrichment reasons (Hogan, 1986; Kajstura, 1989; Ross, 1982).

Demographic Characteristics

Reverse transfer students have tended to be older than the traditional college student (Kajstura, 1989; Rothman, 1991; Steenhoek, 1984). Typically, they work full-time and are married (Delaney, 1995; Mitchell, 1984). Many have been

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previously employed in professional and managerial roles (Hogan, 1986), and they tend to be concentrated in technical and health-related programs at the community college (Lambert, 1993; Ross, 1982; Slark, 1982). Baccalaureate reverse transfer students tend to be college-wise, that is, they are more sophisticated about the norms and expectations of the college environment than typical community college students (Lambert, 1993).

Experience at a Community College

Several studies have inquired whether baccalaureate reverse transfer students achieved their educational goal and how their experience at a community college compared with their experience at a four-year school. All these studies have reported that students were as satisfied or more satisfied with the community college (Kajstura, 1989; Lambert, 1993; Losak, 1980; Rothman, 1991). Students often mentioned a more relevant curriculum and more individual attention as key factors in making their community college experience better than their four-year college experience.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative study is to arrive at a better understanding of the characteristics of four-year college graduates who enter community colleges as long-term students. Its findings will be useful in the development of both additional qualitative studies and large-scale quantitative research. No national studies have been conducted that specifically focus on this population.

The study answers several basic questions concerning four-year graduates attending community colleges:

1. What has been the enrollment trend for these students?
2. What are the demographic and attendance characteristics of these students?
3. What were these students doing—in terms of education and career—before attending a community college?
4. What were the specific educational goals and life experiences that led them to attend a community college?
5. What has been their experience as students at a community college?
6. What factors facilitated their success and what barriers impeded them?

7. How does the community college experience compare with their studies at four-year institutions?
8. To what extent did they achieve their educational and career goals by attending a community college?
9. How do these students rate their overall experience at a community college? Would they recommend a community college to others?
10. In what ways should community colleges adjust, expand, or develop programs and services to serve these students better?

METHOD

The study employed two approaches—an examination of student records and a telephone survey.

Records Research

Student records of four-year graduates attending a large, urban community college were analyzed.[1] The sample population was operationally defined as four-year graduates who (a) enrolled as first-time community college students in Summer 1993 through Spring 1997 and (b) completed 15 credit hours or more at the community college. Four-year graduates who attended on an occasional, casual basis were thus omitted from the sample.

Telephone Survey

In the Fall of 1996, a telephone survey of currently enrolled four-year graduates who had completed at least 15 hours at the community college was carried out. From a population of 1,104 such students, a sample of 100 students was randomly selected, and 40 telephone interviews were completed. If necessary, several attempts were made to contact a student before moving on to the next respondent on the list.

Respondents were asked seven open-ended questions, each of which included predefined probes (see Table 2). However, the interviewer did not necessarily address all the issues with each respondent. Respondents were allowed to direct the discussion based on what they deemed most relevant.

The researcher made summary notes during and immediately after the interviews. The content of these notes was analyzed following procedures

[1] The study was conducted at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Table 2
Interview Questions and Probes

Questions	*Probes*
What was your background—in terms of education and career—before attending the community college?	Degrees received, when last Jobs held, how long Dead-end job, down-sized, low pay
What factors led you to attend the community college?	Features about the College—easy to attend part-time, not expensive, technical courses/programs, small classes
What are or were your career and educational goals at the community college?	Career/educational—degree/career, update, personal interest Relation of community college major to former education
What has been your experience as a student at the community college? What factors facilitated your success and what barriers impeded your success?	Quality of instruction and support services Logistics—class times, locations, etc. Interaction with other students
To what extent did you achieve your educational and career goals by attending the community college?	Still attending, graduate, nonreturn Fulfilled or not fulfilled goals short of graduation—plan to return? List positive career benefits—promotion, new job, improved performance List positive education benefits—increased knowledge, skills; understanding of people, the world
What overall grade would you give the community college? Would you recommend the college to a friend?	Letter grade Why?
In what ways could the community college adjust, expand, or develop programs and services to better serve students like you?	Program/instruction quality and expansion Student and academic support

described by Bogdan and Biklen (1982). Categories of responses were created based on the elements coded and counted in the text. The themes that provide the structure for reporting the results were developed from these categories.

FINDINGS FROM STUDENT RECORDS

The findings from historical records are provided in Tables 3, 4, and 5 (see page 8). Table 3 shows the Fall enrollment for 1993–1996. In all but one year, the percentage of baccalaureate reverse transfer students increased.

Table 4 shows the demographic characteristics of the baccalaureate reverse transfer students who were enrolled in the Fall of 1996. Just over half of the respondents in the study were male (56 percent). Very few were traditional college age, with over half being over 41 and more than 80 percent being over 30. More than 80 percent of the students were white; slightly more than 10 percent were black. Thus the typical baccalaureate reverse transfer student was male, over 40 and white.

Table 5 details the student status characteristics of the baccalaureate reverse transfer students. Sixty-one percent were in academic programs in the technical or vocational area. Of these, 86 percent were in technical programs (e.g., computer systems, engineering, paralegal), while 6 percent were in business-related programs and 9 percent were majoring in a health field.[2]

The specific majors with the largest concentrations of baccalaureate reverse transfer students were computer (59), paralegal (50), business/accounting/international (32), physical therapy (24), engineering related (24), interior design (18), industrial manufacturing related (17), horticulture (16), electronics (14), fire (13), occupational health (12), real estate (11), health information (11), architecture (9), human services (8), respiratory therapy (7), and medical assisting (6).

Eighty-eight percent were attending on a part-time basis, and about two-thirds were taking approximately one course.

Fifty-two percent had earned less than one year of credit, or 45 quarter hours. Twenty-three percent had earned 90 hours of credit or more—at or very close to graduation.

As a group, these students showed a very high level of academic achievement. Twenty-one percent had earned a straight A average, and 85

[2] The lower than expected percentage of health majors is probably the result of the study college's practice of coding students into several health majors only after they complete a year of general coursework and are successful in competing for admission into the program.

Table 3
Enrollment Trends of Baccalaureate Reverse Transfer Students

Year	*Total Enrollment*	*Baccalaureate Reverse Transfers*
Fall 1993	17,702	1,241 (7.0%)
Fall 1994	16,269	1,192 (7.3%)
Fall 1995	15,663	1,170 (7.5%)
Fall 1996	15,420	1,104 (7.2%)

Table 4
Demographic Characteristics of Baccalaureate Reverse Transfer Students

Characteristic	*Number (%)*
Gender:	
Male	618 (56%)
Female	486 (44%)
Age:	
19–25	51 (5%)
26–30	147 (13%)
31-–40	343 (31%)
41 and over	563 (51%)
Race:	
Black	137 (12%)
American Indian	4 (0%)
Asian	51 (5%)
Hispanic	8 (1%)
White	904 (82%)

Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Table 5
Student Status Characteristics of Baccalaureate Reverse Transfer Students

Characteristic	*Number (%)*
Program area:	
General/college transfer	428 (39%)
Technical/vocational	676 (61%)
Career program breakdown:	
Business related	37 (6%)
Technical	580 (86%)
Health	59 (9%)
Credit load:	
1-5 hours	730 (66%)
6-11 hours	238 (22%)
12 or more hours	136 (12%)
Cumulative hours completed:	
0-15 hours	55 (5%)
15.1 to 30 hours	319 (29%)
30.1 to 45 hours	196 (18%)
45.1 to 60 hours	122 (11%)
60.1 to 75 hours	84 (8%)
75.1 to 90 hours	70 (6%)
90.1 or more hours	258 (23%)
GPA:	
0.0 to 0.9	12 (1%)
1.0 to 1.9	9 (1%)
2.0 to 2.9	144 (13%)
3.0 to 3.9	710 (64%)
4.0	229 (21%)
Educational level attained:	
BA level	846 (77%)
More than BA	258 (23%)

Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

percent had earned GPAs of 3.0 or better. About three-fourths of the baccalaureate reverse transfer students reported having earned a BA degree; the rest had earned a Masters.[3]

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

This section details the results from the interviews of 40 baccalaureate reverse transfer students. The findings are divided into three major sections—life circumstances and goals, profiles of students, and experiences as community college students.

Life Circumstances and Goals

Two general questions asked in this study concerned the life circumstances of the four-year graduates attending the community college: (1) What was your background—in terms of education and career—before attending the community college? (2) What are or were your career and educational goals at the community college? The findings from these two questions are presented in Table 6.

Major at Four-Year School

Respondents who had completed four-year degrees in career majors were somewhat more numerous than respondents who had earned a degree in the liberal arts area. In the career area, there were six business majors and three education majors; the other career majors (e.g., health, journalism, counseling) had one respondent each. In the liberal arts area, psychology was the most numerous major, with five students, followed by English, art/theater, and biology. Three respondents had earned a degree beyond the baccalaureate.

Career Experience Following the BA

The majority of respondents had considerable work experience before coming to the community college. Indeed, half of the respondents giving a response to this question reported having worked in their field for more than five years. Within this group, the average number of years worked was 16.

[3] Degrees earned were estimated by reported number of years of education completed. As the literature points out, the identification of students with degrees is often a problem. Some community colleges don't ask unless a student wants to transfer credits. Others have a collection convention that asks for the number of grades completed.

Table 6
Respondents' Backgrounds
and Community College Goals

Characteristic	*Percent*
Major at four-year school:	
Liberal arts	44
Career	56
Career experience following BA:	
Limited experience (less than two-years)	23
Moderate experience (two to five years)	27
Extensive experience (more than five years)	50
Primary goal at community college:	
Career exploration	3
Current job skills update	10
Supplemental income	8
New career	56
Personal interest	23
Community college major:	
Health-related	18
Technical	49
Other	33
Degree intent:	
Yes	46
No	46
Undecided	8

Note: Student responses were not as clear-cut as the table implies. The researcher made judgments as to the assignment to primary categories across questions for each respondent. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Primary Goal at the Community College

An analysis of the respondents' reasons for attending the community college revealed five categories of educational goals: career exploration, current job skills update, supplemental income, new career, and personal interest. Almost eight in ten respondents reentered higher education at the community college level for goals related to employment. Fifty-six percent sought to prepare for a new career through their experience at the community college. Ten percent sought to update skills for their current job (many of these involved computer skills); 8 percent sought skills needed to earn supplemental income (mostly real estate majors); and 3 percent matriculated to explore career areas. Of the 23

percent who entered the community college for self-enrichment, many were taking courses in the arts.

Eleven out of the 36 respondents who responded in this category indicated more than one educational goal. They often saw multiple goals as linked, not discrete categories. For example, some respondents who had begun their studies at the community college in order to secure a new career reported that they intended to continue enrolling in order to keep their skills up-to-date. Other respondents had enrolled to pursue a personal interest, but this interest then led to the potential for supplemental income or a new career.

Community College Major

The respondents' majors at the community college were divided into three major areas—health-related, technical, and other. The technical area had the largest concentration of interest with 49 percent.. Within the technical area, computer science, engineering, and paralegal majors held the most interest. The health-related areas ranked second with 18 percent The 33 percent in the Other category included students who were taking personal interest classes (primarily art and literature) and real estate classes. Table 7 shows the relationship between the four-year degree major and the community college major. The majority of respondents who earned a four-year degree in the liberal arts (53 percent) or in career areas (50 percent) enrolled in technical programs at the community college.

Table 7
Relationship of Four-Year Degree
and Community College Major or Interest

	Community College Major		
Four-Year Degree	*Technical*	*Health*	*Other*
Liberal Arts	53 %	8 %	40 %
Career	50 %	15 %	35 %

Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Degree Intent

Just over half of the respondents initially intended to earn a community college degree (46 percent) or expressed some level of interest in earning a degree (8 percent). Most respondents interested in a degree were enrolled in majors

whose related occupations required a license, including fire science, engineering, paralegal, law enforcement, physical therapy, dental hygiene, nursing, and real estate.

Of the 46 percent who were not interested in a degree, about one-third attended for career reasons.

Profiles of Students

Open-ended, qualitative interviews allow for a detailed description of the life circumstances the respondents were facing prior to their decision to continue their education at the community college. The five educational goals identified in this study provide a framework for profiles of some of the respondents.

Career Exploration

To explore possible careers was the initial goal in entering the community college for two students. One respondent felt certain that he was headed toward a career in some business-related area, while the other student was uncertain, open to different career paths.

One respondent earned a BA in Journalism and worked for ten years selling newspaper ads, primarily in the construction trades area. After taking courses in several areas, the respondent concluded that this prior experience might prove to be a good foundation for a career in real estate—either as a new primary career or as a source of supplemental income. The student started by taking a few courses in real estate and insurance before engaging seriously in this major. In commenting about the choice to attend the community college, the respondent said, "It was a good place to try courses out to see how I might like them. The college made it economically feasible to try different things."

The other student in this category had set aside a four-year degree in history to start a family. With no work experience and a degree in history, she soon realized that her career prospects were limited. However, she was undecided as to a possible career direction, so she elected to take a wide variety of courses of personal interest to see if any area became a dominant interest. This strategy eventually led to entry into a paralegal program.

Current Job Skills Update

Five respondents reported that they reentered education at the community college level to update their skills for their current jobs. Two of them explained that they enrolled in computer courses because competency in the latest computer applications had become a requisite for continuing success in their

fields. These respondents—one an experienced real estate agent and the other a business education teacher—noted that their prior formal education did not include an adequate foundation in technology. The respondents further noted that if their prior training had included more technological applications, the training would certainly be outdated today.

Three other respondents wanted to expand their knowledge in areas related to their current primary jobs. A director of nursing enrolled in several work-related courses, including a class in workmen's compensation law. A teacher with a sociology background wanted to expand her teaching certification into another area: music appreciation. A mechanical engineer noted that his job required him to work with many different types of technicians, but he felt his practical knowledge in these areas was limited. This led him to take a series of practical courses in such areas as heating and air conditioning. He also noted that he may some day change to a more hands-on occupation.

Supplemental Income

Four respondents entered the community college to gain skills that would enable them to supplement their income in an occupational area secondary to their principal jobs. Three of them took courses in real estate—one earned a broker's license. One respondent was an experienced CPA. Two had worked in several different areas during their careers.

The remaining respondent in this area reported having a ten-year career in banking. A personal interest in food preparation led him to develop a small catering business on the side. As the business grew, he started taking a variety of courses in the food and hospitality areas. The respondent remarked, "I started for personal interest, but I am also interested in getting a degree in nutrition and then possibly changing careers."

New Career

Just over one-half of the respondents (56 percent) returned to a formal educational setting at the community college level primarily because they were seeking a new career. Several other respondents mentioned a new career as a possibility, but this was not the major reason why they returned to education.

The respondents who entered the community college with the primary goal of securing new employment can be grouped into several different categories: no intent to relate degree and career, short-time career changers, job displacement new career seekers, and self-elected new beginnings.

No intent to relate BA degree and career. Three respondents reported they never intended to use their four-year degree as educational preparation for a career. Two of them had earned a degree in the arts, and neither expected to earn a living in this field. One later enrolled and completed a degree in fire science and is now employed as a fireman. The other was accepted into a nursing program, but decided not to enroll. He is continuing to take courses for personal interest. The third respondent earned a BS degree in human services, but never intended to work in this field. After working in a dentist's office for four years, this respondent enrolled in a dental hygiene program.

Short-time career changers. Five respondents had worked for a short time after graduation before deciding to change careers. Some had worked in jobs related to their four-year education, while others could not find a related position. Two of these respondents had earned degrees in business. One had worked for a couple of years and then started taking courses toward a degree in computer science. She stopped attending the community college after marriage, but she is considering continuing her studies at a later date. The other had worked for short periods as a church secretary, a real estate agent, and a postal worker. This respondent decided to pursue a career in the postal industry and is currently enrolled in a postal degree program.

Three other respondents had worked for short periods in jobs directly related to their four-year degrees. One with a degree in psychology had worked for two years in a psychiatric hospital and is now studying to become a nurse. Another had worked as a house parent and as a director of group homes for troubled youths and is also studying to become a nurse. The third held a degree in theater and had worked for short times in the theater, as a proofreader, and as a florist. This respondent, who is enrolled in a computer science program, "decided to take courses that would give me skills to get a job anywhere, since I can't always find my particular kind of work."

Job displacement new career seekers. Five respondents entered the community college because their current jobs had been eliminated due to bankruptcy or industry restructuring. After receiving a BA in English, one respondent worked for five years for a wholesale company. When the company filed for bankruptcy, the respondent decided to make a complete change of career, enrolling in a health information program.

Other respondents in this group had worked in industry for years. One had worked in textile manufacturing with a background in biology: "But jobs kept disappearing, so I decided to get skills in a job that hopefully wouldn't

disappear. I have been taking classes one or two at a time, just to get skills. I am not sure whether I want a degree." After earning a degree in business administration, another respondent had worked in the insurance industry until the job was downsized. This respondent is now working towards a degree in the medical assisting area.

A respondent with a degree in English had worked in a bank for years when he decided to rekindle past interests of his that were not as yet fulfilled to help him make a decision about future career possibilities. In the words of this respondent: "My division at the bank was downsized, and other banks were doing the same, so I couldn't get a job in the same line of work. I was tired of being in the bank and thought I might try something totally different. I had at one point considered going to law school, so I decided to go into the paralegal program. I also enjoyed the police aspect, so I took a lot of law enforcement courses also."

Self-elected new beginnings. Seven respondents who were driven by their own desire towards a new career direction rather than being compelled to change by external forces.

In this group, one respondent had earned degrees in elementary education and in accounting. After working as an accountant and as a bookkeeper for several years, this respondent elected to take an entirely new career direction. The respondent enrolled in a physical therapy program, graduated, and is now working in the field. Another respondent worked for a few years in a nonprofit organization and then was employed for 15 years in the corporate sector. Although his formal educational background was in counseling, his work was primarily concerned with computers. He entered the community college to pursue a completely new career—architectural drafting and interior design.

After a 30-year career in fund-raising, another respondent enrolled in the community college to start a career in real estate. After working for several years in jobs that required a baccalaureate degree, a respondent with a history background started taking courses in autocad and graphics to help her husband with his business, and this initially part-time pursuit has resulted in a full-time role. She does not plan to complete a program, just take classes that are directly related to her work. Another respondent had earned a BS degree in commercial photography. He worked for 12 years in the field and also had a background in construction. He was often given photographic assignments for a civil engineering company, and he leveraged this experience into a degree interest in a civil engineering program at the community college.

The last respondent in this category, who had a background in psychology, was a juvenile court counselor for a few years and then worked for a short time in daycare. The respondent, "thought the paralegal program would be a quick way to get a job that would pay well and I would easily find a job." This respondent did receive a degree, but has since decided to continue taking courses (now in graduate school) toward an eventual career in teaching. In going from a four-year degree to a two-year degree to graduate school, this respondent's experience counters the traditional linear progression between the different levels of higher education.

Personal Interest

The personal interest group divides into two major subgroups—those interested in self-enrichment only and those whose interests may have career implications. There were six respondents who fell within the personal interest area. What distinguishes them from others taking courses for personal interest is that they had completed at least 15 hours of credit classes; they are not occasional attendees.

Self-enrichment. Four respondents took personal interest courses without any linkage to a current or future job. All four took courses in the liberal arts.

A school secretary with a background in English and Spanish took recorder classes and now plays in a musical group along with her children. An experienced computer scientist continues to take courses in photography—a long-time personal interest, according to the respondent, "that helps me to think better." A short-time teacher and long-time homemaker with an academic background in English took a variety of courses from physical activity to fine art. And a bank executive "took a class with a neighbor and has been taking classes like oil painting and ceramics ever since."

Self-enrichment/career linkage. Two respondents indicated that their initial self-enrichment interest in attending the community college may lead to a change in career. One experienced insurance agent with a business administration degree started taking horticultural courses with his son. He reports that he may now change to a career in horticulture upon retirement. With a background in psychology, another respondent had worked a variety of jobs not related to his prior education. He now believes that his interest in computers, started primarily as a self-enrichment endeavor, might enable him to pursue a career in this area: "I'm sort of a jack of all trades, and I am trying to settle on one particular field."

Experiences as Community College Students

Respondents were asked to describe their experiences as students at the community college and to discuss the factors that facilitated and the barriers that impeded their success. Their responses were grouped into several broad categories: instruction, flexibility and responsiveness, cost, comprehensiveness, overall rating, comparison with four-year school, composition of students in classes, achievement of goals, and ways the community college can improve.

Instruction

Almost nine in ten of the respondents evaluated the instruction they received at the community college as an important factor affecting their degree of success; only one in ten made negative comments about instruction. Respondents typically described their instructors as "excellent" or "very good," "informative," "knowledgeable," and "helpful professionals."

Respondents especially noted the importance of their instructors' practical orientation to the subject matter—for themselves and for the other older adults in the classroom. They expected to have instructors who "had worked in the field and had more than just textbook knowledge." The respondents said that they were looking for hands-on and real-work life experiences. They also expected instructors to use the wealth of practical knowledge possessed by work-experienced students in their teaching. One respondent captured this perception with the comment, "They realized we were working for a living and got right to the meat of the subject. All the students in my classes...had similar goals. It wasn't like mom and dad were paying our way. Most of us were paying everything ourselves and had a lot of personal experiences, so it made the classes very educational."

When respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their instructors, their major criticism focused on content that was "not what really is needed on the job." However, in all but one case, respondents expressing negative perceptions about instruction also pointed out that their other instructors were good or that they knew of other students who had excellent instructors.

Flexibility and Responsiveness

Over half of the respondents made comments about the flexibility and responsiveness of community college programs. Eight out of ten in this group were positive about the registration and logistics procedures and the times and locations classes were offered. The respondents expected classes to be offered when and where they needed them. The word "convenient" was the key,

according to these respondents; it was mentioned by four in ten of respondents making comments in this area. Only two in ten made negative remarks about program and course flexibility.

Cost

Just over four in ten of the respondents commented positively about the cost of the community college course or program. No respondents made negative comments about costs. Respondents called classes and programs "inexpensive," "economical," "affordable," "reasonable," "the best bargain in town." One respondent commented, "It's an inexpensive place to take courses, especially those for job-related skills." Another respondent pointed out that career exploration is made possible through reasonably priced classes: "It's a wonderful way to try new things without having to spend a lot of money."

Comprehensiveness

About one in five respondents made positive comments about the comprehensiveness of the class offerings and student services at the community college. Comprehensiveness of offerings was an important factor because some respondents were exploring for a new career and others were taking personal interest courses in a wide range of areas. Respondents called the class and program offerings "vast" with "lots of choices." One respondent commented, "There is something that will interest just about everyone. You can work toward a career goal or just have fun."

Overall Rating

Students were asked to grade their experience at the community college and to indicate whether they would recommend it to a friend. The overwhelming grade was an A, with six in ten respondents rating the community college as excellent. One student who expressed considerable dissatisfaction with his program, still gave the community college an overall grade of A. Three in ten respondents gave a rating of B; there were no C grades. Two students gave their experience a D; however, both of them also noted that they knew of other students who had very positive experiences at community colleges.

All but two respondents would recommend the community college program to other students like themselves. One of these students said that he would recommend the college, but not the specific program in which he was currently enrolled. Nine of the 37 students who would recommend the community college reported that they had already made recommendations.

Comparison with the Four-Year School

Students were asked to compare their experience at the community college with their time at a four-year college or university. One-fourth of the respondents made comments on this subject. They judged the community college experience to be as good as or better than the four-year experience on several dimensions. When compared to a four-year institution, respondents saw two-year teachers as providing instruction that is equal or superior; caring more about their students; conveying content that has a more practical, up-to-date orientation; and offering more reasonably priced education. One student commented, "If I knew then what I know now, I would have gone to a community college for the first two years and then transferred."

The experience of another respondent suggested a unique twist to the conventional wisdom. This student concluded that students are better off going to a four-year college first and then attending a community college. The implication was that students develop adequate thinking skills at the four-year college and that this prepares them to take advantage of courses at the community college that help them learn to earn.

Composition of Classes

About one-half of the respondents saw the diversity in age and background in their classes as an important factor in their success. In particular, respondents appreciated a diverse class that included a number of older adults. The presence of older adults made the respondents feel more comfortable and offered the potential for developing friendships. Several students noted that they made long-lasting friendships with individuals they met in their classes.

Also, the mature orientation to academics that characterized older students fit into the respondents' expectations. They noted that older students were more serious about their studies and had a more practical orientation to what they were trying to learn than did the younger students. They equated diversity with academic rigor, a practical work-related orientation, and social comfort. A respondent captured this when he commented that he "wasn't at all intimidated about going there, even old people like me felt comfortable. I like rigor. Classes are hard, I feel like I'm learning a lot. It's not just an easy place to take courses, you really learn something."

Achievement of Goals

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they achieved their educational and career goals by attending the community college. They were

also encouraged to describe career benefits and other positive aspects of their education, such as increased knowledge and skills and improved attitudes.

About half of the respondents reported that they had reached their educational goals or that they were very close to reaching them. Many reported that they were continuing to take courses for job skills update or personal interest. The other half of the respondents were still taking classes and working toward their goals. Only one reported stopping short of the goal with no intention of continuing, and this was due to the poor quality of the program.

Several respondents made comments about the value-added nature of their attendance at the community college. One said, "The courses I've taken have certainly helped in my career." Another said that the courses he took "gave me a path to take to help me get a job; the future career benefits are definitely getting a better paying job in the field I've chosen."

Ways the Community College Can Improve

Respondents were asked to describe ways the community college could adjust, expand, or develop programs and services to better serve students. Most respondents had no suggestions for improvement. By a large measure, the most common response was that the community college should keep on with current programs and services in their current format. Of the just over one-third of the respondents who did suggest ways to improve, six in ten suggested that the community college expand its programs. They suggested that program offerings be extended to other geographical locations, that the number of individuals accepted in a course be enlarged, and that the comprehensiveness of classes offered be enhanced. Two respondents suggested that equipment and facilities needed updating.

On a more negative note, two respondents commented about difficulties with parking. Another complained that the college should come to grips with the problem of inadequate instructors: "The college should have some way to get rid of teachers that aren't that good. Adults don't want to put up with incompetence and waste their time and money with instructors that aren't doing their job."

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The baccalaureate reverse transfer population is an important segment of the community college population. The findings of this research and the findings from previous studies suggest ten major conclusions.

1. **The population of baccalaureate reverse transfer students is substantial and appears to have stabilized at about 10 percent of all credit students.**

The population of baccalaureate reverse transfer students is large. This study found that 7 percent (over 1,000 students) of the credit population at one large urban community college met the study's definition for baccalaureate reverse transfer status, which stipulated the completion of 15 credit hours. Therefore, the finding of 7 percent is probably consistent with the 5 to 13 percent baccalaureate reverse transfer proportion found in studies in which no such stipulation was made (Cohen & Brawer, 1989; Hogan, 1986; Klepper, 1991; Mitchell, 1984; Mitchell & Grafton, 1985;Ross, 1982; Slark, 1982; Steenhoek, 1984). Further, because many colleges may not identify all of the reverse transfer students in their populations, there is good reason to believe that the number of these students may be undercounted (Delaney, 1995).

The proportion of reverse transfer students, with or without the baccalaureate, appears to be stable. It was reported that this population represented 9 percent of all credit students in 1970 (Heinze & Daniels). By the mid-1980s, this proportion had grown to 20 to 25 percent for all reverse transfers with 5 to 13 percent for baccalaureate reverse transfers (Cohen & Brawer, 1989; Hogan, 1986; Hudak, 1983; Mitchell, 1984; Mitchell & Grafton, 1985; Ross, 1982; Slark, 1982; Steenhoek, 1984). However, there appears to be little growth since the 1980s. This study found that the proportion of baccalaureate reverse transfer students increased at the community college under investigation in two of the last three years, but the increase was small.

2. **The demographic and student status characteristics of the baccalaureate reverse transfer student are fairly consistent in the research literature, but the generalizability of these findings to the total population could be strengthened.**

The demographic and student status characteristics of students in this study were consistent for the most part with what other researchers have reported in the literature (Delaney, 1995; Hogan, 1986; Kajstura, 1989; Lambert, 1993; Mitchell, 1984; Ross, 1982; Rothman, 1991; Slark, 1982; Steenhoek, 1984). In the research literature the typical baccalaureate reverse transfer students are male, over 40, and white. They are employed full-time and attend the community college part-time. These students tend to cluster in technical or health-related

programs. This study did not investigate how individual students persist over time at the community college. There is no clear pattern in the literature.

3. **Contrary to expectations, the majority of baccalaureate reverse transfer students have four-year degrees in career areas, not liberal arts areas. Most students within this group have considerable, not limited, work experience.**

In this study, the distribution of four-year degrees by career versus liberal arts area was about 60 to 40 percent, respectively. About half of the respondents had worked over five years at their jobs before enrolling in the community college—the average years worked for this group was 16 years. These findings dispel the belief held by some that baccalaureate reverse transfer students are primarily liberal arts majors who could not find jobs after graduating from a four-year institution. These findings support Hogan (1986), who reported that many reverse transfer students were employed in professional and managerial roles prior to enrolling in a community college.

In part, this phenomenon may be explained by referring to the restructuring of the American economy (Handy, 1989). The middle-level manager sector—normally requiring a BA degree—has been reduced by large numbers in recent years. These displaced workers seek more secure jobs in the growing sectors of the economy—technical and health-related jobs. These jobs typically require more than high school, but less than a four-year degree. Going up the educational hierarchy is no longer a ticket to a secure job. In fact, in some areas advanced degrees may limit prospects for employment. The notion that a higher level of education is a ladder to more money and a higher career status has lost some of its meaning in today's workplace. Individuals are increasingly being forced to abandon the concept of a vertical ascent of a single career ladder for the notion that viable careers can also be horizontal and even discontinuous (Handy, 1989).

Further, as fast-paced technological change and increased global competition continue to change the nature of jobs, it is likely that multiple careers will be increasingly commonplace. It is also likely that many individuals will interweave their careers with periods of study (Handy, 1989).

4. **The majority of baccalaureate reverse transfer students attend community colleges primarily for career reasons, although many also attend for personal, self-enrichment reasons. Many students have multiple, linked goals for attending.**

This research confirmed previous findings from several studies that the primary reason baccalaureate reverse transfer students attend a community college is a career interest (Klepper, 1991; Lambert, 1993, Mattice; 1992; Renkiewicz, 1982; Slark, 1982; Steenhoek, 1984; Tombley, 1993). This study found that students' orientation toward a career can be divided into four categories: career exploration, current job skills update, supplemental income, or new career. Almost eight in ten respondents in this study came with career intentions, with the majority (56 percent) attending to prepare for a new career.

Also, consistent with earlier research (Hogan, 1986; Kajstura, 1989; Ross, 1982), many students attended the community college for personal interest/self-enrichment reasons. In contrast to this study, which found personal interest students to comprise about one-fourth of the total, the studies mentioned above found that the majority of students attended for personal interest reasons. This may be explained by the fact that the earlier studies did not require students to have completed at least 15 hours to be included in the sample. It is interesting to note that the self-interest students in this study are not casual attendees. Several completed a large number of credits, and many also reported career reasons for attending, though they tended to be of secondary importance.

This study found that the baccalaureate reverse transfer student exhibited some tendency to have multiple goals for attending the community college. About one-third of the respondents reported multiple goals. It was their experience that one goal often led to another. For example, an initial personal interest led to a later career development goal, or an initial enrollment for career update led to classes for personal enrichment. Also, respondents tended to see their goals as naturally linked, not as separate, mutually exclusive items.

This study did inquire about the prior work and educational history of respondents. However, it did not inquire about their social lives to a great extent. It would be helpful to more fully understand what triggers in the respondents' social lives may have led them to enroll in the community college. For example, could such factors as divorce and grown children leaving home play a major role?

5. **The profiles of typical baccalaureate reverse transfer students are more complex and numerous than previous research has indicated.**

Prior research was primarily conducted with instruments—either structured surveys or interviews—that were based more on what we knew about student profiles from other populations than the unique characteristics of the

baccalaureate reverse transfer student. Open-ended approaches were used to a limited extent in the research literature (for example, Lambert, 1993).

The design of this study permitted the complexity of the different types of baccalaureate reverse transfer students to emerge more fully. The nine prototypes identified in this study included profiles for the five identified educational goals (exploration, skills update, supplemental income, new career, and personal enrichment) with further breakdowns for the new career and personal interest categories.

Career exploration—Although only a few students entered the community college to explore the curriculum for a new career, this group represents a departure from the common wisdom concerning the role community colleges play in the process individuals use to choose careers. It is a well-recognized goal for many first-time students—especially younger, first-time students—to enter the community college to explore different curricula in order to decide on a career. The respondents in this study pointed out that the community college is also an ideal place for individuals with considerable college and career experience to explore for a new career. In particular, these students mentioned as important factors accessibility—in terms of both cost and location—and the comprehensiveness of offerings. As jobs become more varied and complex in the future, the importance of career exploration as a goal for all types of students will be enhanced.

Skills update—The career update function is an expected goal for the baccalaureate reverse transfer population. These respondents emphasized the value of community college courses that are technologically up-to-date and that have a practical orientation toward the workplace. The respondents expected that the update function would become an ongoing part of their lives as they remain in the workplace.

Supplemental income—The number of respondents attending the community college to gain skills needed to generate supplemental income through a secondary career is consistent with the working patterns of many Americans today. It is becoming more and more common for professionals to seek a second career on the side. Like the exploration function, this function may grow in the future.

New career—Perhaps one of the most revealing findings of this study was the breakdown of the new career seekers into different subgroups. Prior research tended to organize these respondents into one category, but as detailed in the study, in several important respects these students represent quite distinct groupings.

Contrary to the common assumption, respondents who never intended to use their four-year degree to secure employment comprised a small part of the sample. Although most of these respondents had earned degrees in the arts—difficult to market in today's workplace—one had earned a degree in a career area.

All of the respondents who had worked for only a short time before deciding to return to school at the community college entered career programs that had strong links with the workplace—computer science, postal technology, and nursing.

All of the respondents who had entered the community college after being displaced from their jobs due to external forces such as the bankruptcy of their employer or industry restructuring had worked in business and all of them decided to seek careers in technical or health-related areas. It would be interesting to speculate why these respondents did not seek to continue their education on a graduate level. The restructuring of the American workplace, touched on earlier, probably provides a good part of the answer.

Almost 20 percent of the new career seekers had returned to education primarily driven by internal, personal motivation to change their careers. The nature of the life circumstance driving this change was different for each respondent. In most cases, the change represented an entirely new career path: business to physical therapy, managerial job to architectural drafting and interior design, fund raising to real estate, photography to civil engineering.

Personal enrichment—About a quarter of the respondents attended the community college for personal reasons. It was anticipated that the study's design—requiring 15 hours of credit at the community college—would eliminate these students from the sample. However, there is apparently a group of consistent personal enrichment students, as well as a group that attends on a much more limited basis. Most of these persistent attendees took courses in the arts. Also, the research identified two respondents whose initial self-enrichment intent was later linked to a career goal.

6. Baccalaureate reverse transfer students were satisfied with the instruction they received and the community college overall.

Respondents found instruction to be centered in the world of work and reported that programs and services were economical, comprehensive, and responsive to their needs. The community college experience compared favorably with the respondents' experience at four-year institutions.

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Respondents were generally well satisfied with the instruction they received. They were especially pleased when the instruction focused on real workplace issues. Respondents also expected that programs and services would be affordable, cover all their needs, and be offered when and where they needed them. The key word for these students was "convenience."

All but two respondents gave the community college a grade of A or B, with the majority of grades given as A. All but two respondents would recommend the community college to others, and nine respondents had already done so. When compared to four-year institutions, respondents saw community college teachers as providing instruction that was equal or superior, caring more about their students, and conveying content that was more practical and up-to-date; and more reasonably priced.

The research literature has also reported a high degree of satisfaction with community college programs and favorable comparisons with four-year colleges or universities (Kajstura, 1989; Losak, 1980). However, Lambert (1993) reported that baccalaureate reverse transfer students were concerned about the low-status image of the community college held by some. This study did not find this result, but this particular question was not systematically asked.

7. Baccalaureate reverse transfer students are serious about their education and are more comfortable with classmates who share this orientation.

Respondents appreciated classes that included students like themselves as well as a diversity of other student types. They felt more comfortable in this setting and often made long-lasting friendships. The importance of social relationships to this population has not been emphasized in the literature and was not anticipated in this study.

Respondents also appreciated the mature and practical orientation to academic matters held by older students like themselves. Baccalaureate reverse transfer students have high academic expectations for themselves and for the community college. The distribution of grades for this population at the study community college bears witness to the serious nature of these students.

8. Baccalaureate reverse transfer students found success through their community college experience.

About one-half of the respondents reported reaching their educational goals or being very close to reaching their goals. Almost all of the remaining students reported that they are continuing to work toward goal completion.

Several respondents also made comments about the value-added nature of their attendance. This included such factors as graduating and getting a job in the desired field, meeting new friends, and personal enrichment.

9. Baccalaureate reverse transfer students recommend that the community college continue with its current programs and services.

Almost all the respondents would recommend the community college to other students like themselves. Very few had suggestions for improving programs and services. Almost all suggested that the community college should continue with its current program and course offerings. When students offered ideas for improvement, the most common recommendations were to expand the program, to offer more courses, to expand the locations, or to include more students.

10. A national study is needed to document the extent of this population and to better understand the nature of these students.

Since the two populations of reverse transfer students—those who have previously earned a baccalaureate degree and those who have not—are quite different in terms of student and demographic characteristics and educational goals, it is important that studies consistently separate these populations and study them separately.

With a few exceptions, most of the studies conducted in this area have been limited to a single institution. Also, it has been 15 years since the last national study was conducted (Hudak, 1983), and this study did not differentiate between the two types of reverse transfer students. Since both reverse transfer populations comprise a significant proportion of the community college population, a comprehensive national study is overdue.

A more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the baccalaureate reverse transfer student population will have implications for the way community colleges provide instruction and student services and the way they market to their key constituencies. This population—given its size and unique nature—may eventually comprise a distinct mission area for the community college. This may develop in the same way that customized education grew out of the community service and continuing education missions (Community College Roundtable, 1994). The need for a national study has also been called for in the research literature. Delaney (1995) notes that Lambert (1993), Klepper (1991), and Kajstura (1989) have all called for a national study.

The findings of this study provide fertile ground for the development of a quantitative, national survey that more closely reflects the diversity within this population and that focuses on all the issues that are key to understanding its complexities. A combination of mailed forced-choice and in-depth telephone interviews would be a reasonable approach.

CONCLUSION

The baccalaureate reverse transfer student represents a very different type of second-chance student for the community college. This study has broadened our understanding of these students. These results now need to be substantiated and the additional research questions identified in this study need to be asked. It is likely that a continued response to the needs of the baccalaureate reverse transfer student will lead to the creation of a distinct new mission area for the community college in the near future. Understanding more about this population will help us prepare for this eventuality.

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